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AUTHOR Charry, Myrna B.
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ABSTRACT

Paraphrasing (the reading and rewriting of text material), though widely used as an alternative method of assessing comprehension, may also be viewed as an instructional technique and may be useful in the teaching of English as a Second Language. Teaching students to rewrite (paraphrase) what they read, a skill akin to summarizing, demonstrates the interrelationships between reading and writing and facilitates the integration, instruction, and mastery of both processes. It is a holistic and integrated instructional approach to language development which should prove useful with students learning English as a second language. The value of this instructional strategy is currently being assessed in a pilot experiment. (SR)

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Teaching English as a Second Language (L2) Students to Paraphrase What They Read

Article Prepared by Myrna B. Charry, Ed.D, Professor, Queensborough CC.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing interest in paraphrasing (the reading and rewriting of text material, Shugarman and Hurst, 1986) among teachers and reading researchers. However, most interest has focused on using paraphrasing as an alternate means of assessing comprehension (Kalmbach, 1986). The purpose of this article is to examine paraphrasing as an instructional technique, and to determine its usefulness for students speaking English as their second (L2) language.

Although paraphrasing has been used widely to assess comprehension, it has rarely been examined as a teaching/learning tool. Evidence suggests, however, that paraphrasing like summarizing, could be a useful classroom technique (Rinehart, Stahl, & Erickson, 1986; Charry, 1987). Rewriting the author's message gives students an operational plan that helps them find meaning. Students become active readers: They read with a purpose, with a format, a framework to decipher semantic and syntactic clues, and a method of monitoring their comprehension.

THE READING/WRITING CONNECTION

Teaching students to rewrite (paraphrase) what they read demonstrates the interrelationships between reading and writing and facilitates the integration, instruction and mastery of both processes. On the one hand, reading requires students to detect the relationship between and the

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relative importance of ideas within a written text. The reading process is complete when students get meaning FROM print. On the other hand, when students write, they get meaning INTO print. They use the same cognitive process to organize and order ideas in the attempt to write coherently.The writing process is complete when students produce clear text: an opening thesis statement followed by relevant supporting details. When examining instruction that utilizes the reading/writing connection, researchers have concluded that such instruction improves both processes (Lewis, 1987).

PARAPHRASING/SUMMARIZING TRAINING WITH L2 STUDENTS

As a teaching and learning tool, paraphrasing is akin to summarizing, both requiring students to read and rewrite the author's message. One can extrapolate from the literature on summarizing training that paraphrasing will similarly facilitate reading and writing competence. In addition, research findings reveal that students can be taught to summarize what they read and that once mastered, comprehension skills will improve (Weinstein, 1977; Wong, 1985).

Summarization rules developed by Brown and Day (1983) have been used to train students to restate what they read. However, most research has examined the impact of summarization training on native born students and the effect of this training on L2 students is not known.

We do know that L2 students lack English language skills and it is hypothesized that paraphrasing/summarizing training will help them develop these skills. Empirical evidence points in that direction! For

example, when L2 students know they must summarize what they read, they search for text organization, pose questions and look for answers. This process of comprehension monitoring facilitates reader/author interaction and is particularly useful for L2 students who frequently get lost in the maze of the English text and become too frustrated to extricate themselves. Comprehension monitoring helps L2 students to pinpoint what is unclear and to find ways to remediate the situation: They may discuss the text with peers or teachers, or find answers from outside resources such as a dictionary and/or Thesaurus. Reading in this way helps L2 students combine listening, speaking and reading skills in the search for meaning.

When L2 students write the summary (paraphrase the message), they learn to use correct English syntax, to change sentences from the inactive to the active tense, to alternate between various English negatives, and to generate synonyms. In addition, the summary provides students with a written "first draft", a difficult task for many L2 students. This draft begins the writing and revision process and moves students closer to producing coherent text.

Teaching L2 students to summarize what they read exemplifies a holistic and integrated instructional approach to language development: As students read, they learn to remediate gaps in understanding; as they listen and speak to one another, they learn to be more attentive and more lucid; as they write, they learn to organize ideas sequentially. Teaching L2 students to summarize what they read is a total language learning package!

A PILOT EXPERIMENT

Although most researchers agree that native born students can be taught to summarize what they read and that once mastered, summarization training will improve reading and writing skills, the hyposthesis that L2 students will benefit from similar instruction is yet to be proven. This author has been teaching summarization skills to L2 community college students for several years with encouraging results and is currently conducting a pilot experiment in the attempt to assess and quantify the value of this instructional strategy. Methods and materials, anecdotal records from students and teacher, and pre and post test scores on teacher-made criterion referenced tests will be examined and a statistical analysis will reveal the impact of these variables. If results are positive, this strategy could provide L2 teachers with a new method to integrate, rather than fractionalize, language instruction.

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